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SUBJECT: ISLAMIC CENTER HAMBURG'S AYATOLLAH SHARES INITIATIVES,  
THOUGHTS ON U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS

REF: E-MAIL CORRESPONDENCE PAETZOLD-NEA/IR 03/08/07

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CLASSIFIED BY: Duane Butcher, Consul General, U.S. Consulate  
General Hamburg, U.S. Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: CG Hamburg and Embassy Berlin Iranwatcher hosted an informal meeting at the CGR with the head of the Islamic Center of Hamburg (ICH), Ayatollah Seyyed Abbas Hosseini Ghaemmaghami on March 20. Ghaemmaghami, an Iranian national who has served as the ICH director since 2004, discussed his background, his initiatives at the ICH, and called for the U.S. to engage directly with Iran, noting that bringing the current leadership to the negotiating table would be a victory in itself. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Ghaemmaghami was joined by his brother-in-law, who is also the ICH's Deputy Director, Seyyed Nasir Mohammad Taghavi and a Farsi-German interpreter Dr. Yousef Amirian. ConGen Hamburg Pol/Mil Off and Berlin Iranwatcher were also present. The Islamic Center of Hamburg (ICH) has served the Shi'ite community in Hamburg since 1955; its director has been historically considered the Shi'ite leader for all of Europe. Prominent former directors of the ICH include former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (who served at the ICH from 1978-1980) and the late Ayatollah Mohammad Hosseini-Beheshti (1965-1970).

13. (C) BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Ghaemmaghami, who appears to be in his late 30s, told the CG that he is youngest person in history to have achieved Ayatollah status, and still remains the youngest Ayatollah. He completed his Ijtihad theological exam before the age of 20, having studied in Qom and at the University of Tehran, where he later also taught as a professor. Ghaemmaghami spoke most of the time in Farsi, but occasionally made comments in German and appeared to understand portions of German conversation. Ghaemmaghami also related his family's prominent Persian lineage: his great grandfather served as a royal advisor and teacher in the Qajar Dynasty and was an early patron of the revered 19th century Iranian royal advisor and bureaucratic reformer Amir Kabir.

14. (C) VISITS TO U.S. IN 1990s: During the discussion, Ghaemmaghami detailed at length a visit to the University of Kansas in 1994 on the invitation of then-Senator Robert Dole. He was also invited to the University of California, Berkeley, to hold lectures at the Department of Philosophy in 1995. Later in the conversation, when asked his opinion of Hamburg, Ghaemmaghami contrasted the relative aloofness of Germans and

his "too few friends" in Hamburg to the warmth and friendliness he experienced while in the U.S.

15. (C) ICH INITIATIVES FOCUS ON RELIGION IN EUROPE:

Ghaemmaghami outlined a number of his initiatives at the ICH. First, he is trying to instill the idea of "European Islam" in his followers, noting that the Islam in Iran differs from that of Arabia or Africa, and so on. He emphasized the need for Muslims to leave behind some of their cultural baggage when arriving in Europe, but dodged questions about how specifically his European Islam would differ from practices at home. A second endeavor focuses on strengthening the European network of Shi'ite theologians, regardless of their nationality. Ghaemmaghami related that he had recently established a Union of Shi'ite Teachers and Theologians, which he leads.

16. (C) Third, he mentioned his efforts to depoliticize the ICH.

He noted that his congregation is not exclusively Iranian and that he must consider this fact in his work. Dissatisfaction had been expressed within the community about these changes, he said, but he has the situation under control. (NOTE: While Ghaemmaghami did not elaborate on the details of what depoliticization means, we have been told recently by both state- and federal-level Offices for the Protection of the Constitution that Ghaemmaghami has forbidden Hezbollah members from holding political meetings at the ICH, a change from earlier practice. END NOTE)

17. (C) THOUGHTS ON U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS: When asked about the nuclear standoff, Ghaemmaghami repeated "I am not a politician", but proceeded to opine that it would be best if the U.S. and Iran would talk directly. Ghaemmaghami noted that in the 30 years of no diplomatic relations between the two countries, factions in Iran had benefited politically from their anti-U.S. stances. He related a number of personal conversations with former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, during which Khatami claimed that American overtures had been made for direct discussion. Khatami had cited pressure from (and fear of) these anti-U.S. factions as a major cause in his

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failure to reach out to the U.S. Now that these factions are in power, getting them to the negotiating table should be seen as a victory in itself.

18. (C) In one of his few questions, Ghaemmaghami inquired as to whether the CG or other U.S. diplomats were in regular contact with their Iranian counterparts in Hamburg. He appeared genuinely surprised when the CG explained that, though we would behave politely with our Iranian official counterparts, official contact is prohibited. The Ayatollah said that he thought that only Iranian diplomats were subject to such restrictions.

19. (C) INVITATION TO ICH: Ghaemmaghami closed the afternoon by extending an invitation to the CG to visit the ICH, noting that it would be no problem for them to host such a visit. He expressed interest in a further meeting with the CG.

110. (C) COMMENT: Ghaemmaghami's reputation for charisma, charm, and eloquence were on full display during the two and a half hour meeting. At times direct and at other times politely (but purposely) vague, Ghaemmaghami spent much of the time relaying his points wrapped in anecdotes and references to events and personalities in Shi'ism and Persian history (but interestingly, never the Koran). Ghaemmaghami's assertion that he is not politically minded was quickly undermined by his multiple references to his relationship with Khatami. While he may refrain from overtly political activities in his current position, he appears (at first glance) to be well-situated, in terms of age and qualifications, to launch a political career, following in the footsteps of his ICH predecessors. END COMMENT.  
BUTCHER